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ABSTRACT

Children's exposure to violence can potentially impede all stages of their development. This bulletin discusses why abused children have difficulty learning and the impact of growing up in violent surroundings and unsafe neighborhoods. It identifies the risk factors of violence, as well as the following key factors that contribute to a child's ability to overcome the effects of a dangerous environment: (1) having access to an educational environment that promotes constructive coping skills and helps children understand how they can actively participate and achieve in life; (2) learning an active coping style that allows them to become involved in activities and positive relationships; (3) achieving an adequate level of self-confidence and self-esteem and a sufficient level of cognitive competence; and (4) engaging in a strong, caring relationship with an adult who models positive social behavior. Learning itself can also be a tool for violence prevention. The basic charge to schools is to provide all children with an academically sound education in a safe environment: to develop school-community partnerships, promote parent participation in school decision making, and offer an array of programs such as job training, adult education courses, family counseling services, or recreational programs. (LMI)

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Hidden Casualties: The Relationship between Violence and Learning

Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Sher Quaday

Violence has invaded every sector of our lives. It knows no social, racial, ethnic, gender, or age restrictions, and the inner city no longer has a corner on the market. Directly or indirectly, we are all victims of the violence sweeping across this nation. Whether in school, the home, the community, or the media, children's exposure to violence can potentially impede all stages of their development.

Low-weight babies born to battered women often are at greater risk for developmental problems. Growing up in a violent environment may delay children's development, and chronic exposure to violence can limit young children's cognitive development and affect their ability to form attachments.

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Abused Children

There are a number of reasons why abused children have difficulty learning. They often grow up in chaotic environments that are unpredictable and dependent on the moods of the abusive parent or caregiver. Out of fear and caution, they learn to dull their own feelings, thoughts, and responses, and instead mirror the mood of the person who could turn on them at any minute. Language development—so critical for school and positive social interaction—is often delayed and subverted for abused children. They trust mood and tone more than the content of language, because they are always alert for clues that they might be in danger.

Abused children may grow up thinking they have no impact on the world because so many unpredictable things happen to them, no matter what they do. This sense of powerlessness inhibits the normal development of setting goals and delaying gratification that is essential both for attaining adulthood and performing well in school (Craig 1992).

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Safe Home, Unsafe Neighborhood

Even when children grow up free from abuse, but in violent surroundings, they still suffer from the negative impact of violence on learning. Their caregiver's vigilance in keeping them safe may actually impede their learning process. One of an infant's first tasks is learning to trust—his parents, environment, and eventually himself as he learns to walk, jump, and climb. The chronic threat of community violence causes some parents to keep their child's activity within their home, thereby not only limiting the

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child's interaction with his environment, but also his interactions with others. During preschool years, children are ready and eager to explore new relationships outside the family. However, living in a dangerous neighborhood may mean they aren't allowed to go out or talk to anyone new. These restrictions, caused by violence, are often difficult for toddlers to understand and obey, and may slow their development.

A serious problem for children who witness violence or grow up in violent neighborhoods is that they often can't tell the "good guys" from the "bad guys," so they don't know who to trust and who to believe. It is hard for children in a violent, confusing environment, in which bad and good are intertwined, to find and learn from good role models. Police may be seen as dangerous, and drug dealers—who schools and the media portray as bad guys—may be neighbors, friends, or members of the family.

One study of inner-city children's exposure to violence found that the parents of these high-risk children report abuse among *adults* in the family five to six times higher than the national average (Richters and Martinez 1993). Researchers say that chronic exposure to violence can be viewed as repetition of acute traumatic episodes, which can limit the development of cognitive ability, affect children's ability to form close attachments, and disturb physiological functioning. Children living with danger develop defenses against their fears, and these interfere with development, for energy spent on defenses is not available for learning.

In response to a trauma, children may adopt regressive behaviors such as thumb-sucking, or may experience anxiety, helplessness, and emotional numbness. Regressing helps children feel comforted by recalling an easier time in their lives. It allows them to postpone dealing with difficult feelings or re-living the traumatic event. However, when children are exposed to chronic violence or trauma, they are at risk of regressing to earlier stages of development as well. Witnesses of chronic violence may also develop additional problems of poor concentration or short attention span, and experience a general decline in academic performance (Lorion and Saltzman 1993).

The effect of trauma on children may vary, depending on the type of trauma—a single episode, such as the death of a parent, or recurrent trauma, such as child abuse. A typical response to a single event is for a child to feel helpless and out of control, followed by an attempt to adapt, and to regain control. A boy who witnesses a shooting on his way home from school thereafter walks a different way, feeling that is the only way he'll feel safe again. Even though he is no safer than he would be on his normal route, he has adapted and regained control by changing his route.

Recurrent trauma may cause denial. In response to repeated abuse, or witnessing violence continually, a child's memory gets fragmented. Not acknowledging the violence allows children to avoid feelings of helplessness, or to "zone out" and numb themselves to all emotion.

Both individual traumatic episodes and recurrent trauma have a significant impact on learning, impairing the acquisition of social skills and the ability to integrate values. Children exposed to trauma don't expect anyone to be nice to them. They dwell on negative behaviors, and their own misbehavior or "acting out" causes them to receive more and more negative messages from teachers or caregivers. They may be overly aggressive and, oddly enough, identify with their abuser. They may feel they are at fault for the violence. But the most devastating effect of violence on learning for these children is that they don't feel they have a future (Ayoub 1995).

Older children who are exposed to violence often are afraid of school or of what might happen to their mothers or younger siblings while they are at school. When they do go to school, their anxiety interferes with their ability to concentrate. School-aged children who live in violent environments also experi-

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PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

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School Climate. Staff members, students, and parents demonstrate a genuine interest in the welfare of one another.

Conflict resolution procedures are applied fairly and consistently.

ence frequent problems that can interfere with their ability to learn, including sleep problems and stress-related complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, and asthma attacks.

Unfortunately, children are not only exposed to violence in the home and community, but also face violence in the school, where it is increasingly lethal. A 1993 National School Boards Association survey of 2,000 schools nationwide (urban, suburban, and rural) revealed that 82 percent of respondents had witnessed an increase in school-based violence. Twenty years ago students may have sustained some injuries in a playground brawl. Today they are more likely to carry weapons and the event is more likely to end in homicide.

Risk Factors for Violence and Failure

Two Harvard University researchers suggest that, even though there are multiple factors contributing to violence, early predictors of violence include characteristics of children such as: low IQ, poor verbal skills, attention deficit disorder, poor motor skill development, head injury, prenatal and perinatal complications, and antisocial behavior and problems (Buka and Earls 1993). One documented risk factor for violence and associated school failure is poverty, dramatic among children in the U. S. and on the rise everywhere from rural areas to inner cities. It exacerbates family difficulties by creating extreme stress and simultaneously cutting the family off from common support mechanisms. A number of studies have pointed out the link between poverty, behavioral problems, and difficulty in school. A recent study of low-income families observed several violence-related characteristics that can cause behavior or learning problems in school. Children in these families:

- Were more likely to receive harsh discipline in their homes;
- Observed more violence than their peers;
- Received less cognitive stimulation in the home; and
- Received less warmth from mothers because of their increased stress, isolation, and lack of social supports (Dodge, Pettit and Bates 1994).

Regardless of income or social status, certain parenting practices also appear to promote subsequent violence among adolescents. For example, inadequate discipline, use of corporal punishment, excessive exposure to media violence, and the presence of guns in the home all increase the likelihood of injury or death due to violence.

Some families, however, seem able to rise above the violence and problems that surround them. Five characteristics, says one researcher, enable some families to raise and nurture their children, instill them with hope, and survive, despite violent neighborhoods and other adversity: strong family bonds, flexible family roles, strong religious faith, a serious work ethic, and an expectation of high achievement. Many of these factors are fostered by an extensive network of support from relatives, friends, churches, or synagogues. For very young children who have been exposed to violence, consistent, warm relationships with child care professionals and teachers have been essential for their recovery and healthy development. Such children need structure even more than usual, with clear expectations, limits, and a set routine which gives a child something predictable and comforting. Children exposed to violence also benefit from opportunities to express their fears, experiences, and problems—in play, art, and other activities.

School administrators must build coalitions of community groups to ensure that long-term, multifaceted approaches are implemented to bring about peaceful schools and safe communities. Educators and health care providers must work together, so children who bring problems to school can get the physical and mental health care they need.

Schools from all around the country have employed innovative strategies to help families develop skills and a sense of community. These schools tend to subscribe to the philosophy that successful families, used in the broadest sense, are critical to a community's survival. They work to develop community/school partnerships that are dynamic, diverse, and driven by the needs of the families within. They provide parents with an active voice in school planning and policies. They may offer an array of programs such as after-school activities for children, adult education courses, family counseling services, recreational programs, or job skills training. They become a vital hub of neighborhood activity and they work to prevent violence.

Learning as Violence Prevention

Learning itself is a vital tool for violence prevention. It has been shown that cognitive skills help chil-

SOLUTIONS

Several key factors contribute to a child's ability to emerge healthy from a dangerous environment. They include:

- Access to an educational environment that promotes constructive coping skills and helps children understand how they can actively participate and achieve in life.
- Learning (or innately possessing) an active coping style that allows them to become involved in activities and positive relationships.
- Achieving an adequate level of self-confidence and self-esteem, and a sufficient level of cognitive competence. Intelligence and a level of self-regard helps keep children from resorting to simplistic, but destructive, interpretations of their experiences.
- A strong, warm relationship with an adult who models positive social behavior.

dren reason their way through stressful and dangerous situations. Those with superior language skills and analytic abilities are less likely to use force to persuade and more likely to use creative and intellectual exercises to imagine and respect different points of view. They can also envision more clearly the consequences of their actions, and they possess a greater repertoire of alternative options to violent behavior.

When our children's ability to learn is being dangerously undermined, the foundation of society is being damaged in a manner that cannot be easily repaired. In breaking the cycle of violence, there are several things that schools can do. Our most vulnerable students, those growing up in an atmosphere of violence, must be given extra attention through tutoring, nurturing, after-school programs, and conflict resolution programs. Schools can be an anchor, a focus for community organizing, a safe haven, and a place for children to learn skills that prevent violence.

Violence prevention need not be a separate curriculum or course. Educators often talk about "the teachable moment." While conflict resolution courses are valuable, they need not be the only way in which violence prevention is taught. The history and literature classes should, for example, also be viewed as vehicles for incorporating conflict resolution messages into day-to-day education.

The basic charge to schools is to provide all children with an academically sound education in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. In addition, there is perhaps no better place than schools to house and nurture community coalitions to improve the quality of life for families. Schools that are responsive to community needs and respectful of cultural differences provide a natural environment and an existing resource for multidisciplinary programs. A school is a place where diverse groups of children and parents can congregate and promote community interests, a place to gain practice and experience getting along with others.

Children are remarkably resilient and can beat the odds with the help of supportive families, schools, and educators. With love, support, education, and training they can express their feelings, learn to avoid and defuse violent situations, help each other control peer violence, and use their curricula-developed reasoning and problem-solving skills as tools for violence prevention. Schools can make a difference. Without cross-sector efforts centered in the school, the children who face violence regularly may be doomed to live their daily lives as warriors rather than learners. With our help they can continue their education, learning to their full potential, instead of ending up as our country's hidden casualties.

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